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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the depiction of older characters in basal reader series from 1975 to 1983. A checklist was used to collect data concerning the treatment of older people in the stories and pictures of the following series: (1) Macmillan and Company (1975), (2) Allyn and Bacon (1978), (3) Scott Foresman (1978), Ginn and Company (1982), and (5) D.C. Heath (1983). Older people were identified by descriptive terms in the text, by pictures, and by designation of grandparents in the narrative. The checklist was marked according to whether the character appeared in the story only, in the picture only, or in both. The findings revealed that the elderly were presented more favorably in newer basal readers than in earlier series with regard to their capabilities, occupations, mentality, physical well being, personality, appearance, activities, and overall image. The gender bias in favor of males, however, still existed in both stories and pictures. (FL)

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THE PORTRAYAL OF OLDER CHARACTERS IN FIVE SETS OF BASAL READERS

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INTRODUCTION

By the year 2000 it is projected that there will be more than ten times as many older Americans as there were in 1900--an increase from 3 million to 32 million persons. It is not difficult, therefore, to acknowledge that the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population is the over-75 age group. (Ulin, 1982) One of the problems associated with this phenomenon is the subtle and pervasive stereotyping of the aged and of the aging process which has evolved in our society. Prejudice and negative attitudes directed toward older people have been propagated (perhaps unintentionally) by the literature and by other mass media. Ageism has been defined by Butler and Lewis (1973, p. 9) as "a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old." A report by the Gray Panthers which

was submitted to the 1981 White House Conference on Aging specified that ageism is the discrimination against a person or group because of chronological age. (1981) Comfort (1977) explains that oldness is based on a system which expels people from useful work after a set number of years, and they are relegated to join an under-privileged minority--a practice justified by "mythological" misconceptions of the aged.

Children's value systems are formed early in life, and are modified by interactions with people, influences of institutions, and information from mass media (Page et al, 1981). The way older people are depicted in children's readers has a direct effect on the shaping of students' attitudes toward the aged, and toward acceptance of their own participation in the aging process.

Evidence of Stereotyping of the Elderly. Studies have confirmed that children's literature has frequently transmitted discriminatory impressions of older people, and that children have formed an aversive disposition toward the elderly and toward aging. Ansello (1978) examined 656 children's books and found that only 16.46% of the books contained any older characters; their roles in the stories were minor, with stereotypical images of rocking chairs, aprons, canes, and wrinkles prevailing. Storey (1977) laments:

> It is not unusual to see pictures of elderly women, with their glasses perched on the ends of their noses, rocking in chairs and wearing odd dresses protected by aprons. Men are pictured as semi-bald, smoking pipes, bent over, having difficulty walking, and dressed in sport clothes or baggy pants. (p. 529)

In a review of over 300 research views of the elderly, McTavish (1971) concluded that the media conveyed that old people were generally ill, tired, forgetful, grouchy, withdrawn, isolated, and unproductive.

A group of fifth graders analyzed elderly book characters and determined that the older people didn't work, have fun, or do anything exciting; were sad, lonely, and bored; were mean, crabby, overly tidy, fussy, and unfair; and the grandparents in the books looked older than their own (Storey, 1979). Kingston and Drotter (1981) examined six sets of basal readers and discovered that the aged were shown in a positive manner, but they were rarely portrayed as fashionable, attractive, or good-looking. They concluded that basal readers do not adequately depict aged men and women in a realistic nonstereotypical manner.

The Children's Attitudes Toward the Elderly (CATE) scale was administered to 144 students; the students expressed a reluctance to getting old, and they described the elderly using negative physical characteristics such as wrinkles, grey hair, and false teeth (Page et al, 1981). When the CATE was administered to another sample of 180 children (Jantz et al, 1977), it was learned that children's attitudes toward the elderly were a mixture of positive feelings of affect and negative feelings about the physical aspects of age. Fillmer (1981) investigated whether elementary pupils stereotype older people and found that more than 80% of the responses for young adults was positive; conversely, 63% and 83% of the responses for older adults (women and men, respectively) were negative. (There were 20% more negative adjectives associated with the old man than with the old woman in the responses of both boys and girls.)

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Research indicates that children's books do stereotype the elderly. However, in recent years organized groups have mounted a concerted movement to help people see the elderly as they really are (Storey, 1977).

The Gray Power Movement involves citizens who "are redefining the notion of old. They are generally better educated, better satisfied with themselves, healthier, wealthier and more active than elderly in previous generations." (Fillmer, 1984) It was the purpose of this study to investigate the depiction of older characters in basal readers since 1975. Major categories of interest included: nationality, role in the story, characterization, occupation, image, mentality, physical well-being, personality, appearance, activities, literary genre, illustrations, and the overall impression of the aged.

PROCEDURES

A detailed checklist was compiled to be used in analyzing the treatment of older people in the stories and pictures of five sets of basal readers: Macmillan & Company, 1975; Allyn and Bacon, 1978; Scott Foresman, 1978; Ginn, 1982; and D. C. Heath, 1983. All the stories from primer through sixth grade were included in this analysis. Older people were identified by 1) descriptive terms in the text (e.g. the old lady who lived down the street); 2) pictures in the readers; and 3) designation of grandparents in the narrative. The checklist was marked according to whether the character appeared in the story only, in the illustration only, or in both the story and the picture.

FINDINGS

Number of references to the elderly. A total of 553 older characters appeared in the stories and/or pictures of the five reading series. When animal characters assumed roles in the stories and/or pictures, they were included as part of the total number of characters analyzed. Among such animal characters were Grandpa Turtle, Grandmother Spider, Espresso the monkey who was 73 years old, an old fish, dog, rooster, donkey, cat, bull-frog, and goose. Unclassified references to older characters occurred 88 times--46 percent male, 34 percent female, and 19 percent either or both (e.g. grandparent/s). These references were not included in the final total because there was no way to determine the occupations, mentality, and general characterisitcs of the referents.

There were 25 references to females and 35 to males in text alone. In pictures alone with no references in the text there were 36 females and 75 males. The total number of males appearing in the readers was 353 or 64 percent, while the total number of females appearing was 200 or 36 percent.

Nationality, characterization and role of the elderly. Approximately 73 percent of elderly men and 72 percent of elderly women appearing in the stories were white. Fewer than 20 percent of older characters were protrayed as grandparents and fewer than 2 percent as aunts or uncles. Approximately one third of the elderly appeared as main characters. Another 24 percent played supporting roles. Although one out of four older characters were white collar workers, such as doctors, professors, writers or scientists, men comprised 18 percent of the white collar workers while women comprised 7 percent. Fewer than 4 percent of the elderly were shown as being retired in the stories. However the occupational status of 45 percent of the older characters was not indicated.

Physical well being, mentality and image of the aged. In reviewing the manner in which the elderly were depicted physically and mentally and the degree to which they were shown to be acceptable members of society, the results were positive. Older characters were shown to be in good health 96 percent of the time. Of a total of 553 references 546 or 99 percent showed older characters to be intelligent and capable. For the most part older men and women in the basal reader stories were shown as competent, skillful and hardworking. A negative image was portrayed for elderly characters only 5 percent of the time. Such incidences occurred mainly in folklore with characters such as old giants and Rumpelstilskin.

Personality and activities of older people. Older people most often manifested pleasant personalities and demonstrated qualities of kindness, cheerfulness and friendliness. Most were affectionate in their interactions with children. Only 28 of 553 or 5 percent of the references to older people depicted them as irritable, grouchy, crabby, unfriendly, babbling or mean. Older people were shown as being active rather than passive in 502 of 553 or in 91% of the references. In the 9% of the instances in which the older people were passive, they were generally shown interacting with other characters in the story. They were seldom shown watching television, rocking, knitting or storytelling. So, while they were physically inactive they were mentally active.

Appearance of the elderly. Many criticisms appear in the literature regarding the appearance of older persons in earlier reading series. Therefore, details regarding the dress, posture and general characteristics of the elderly as they are presented in the books that were analyzed in this investigation are presented in Table I. Column one indicates the

item appearing on the checklist. The headings Male and Female show the number of descriptions for men and women appearing in the stories. The Percentage of Male and Female indicates the percentages that the descriptions represent when applied to the 353 men and 200 women respectively. The Total of Elderly combines all observations. The Percent of Elderly indicates the percentage of observations applied to the combined 553 elderly men and women in the stories.

Table I

Appearance of the Elderly as Depicted in Basal Readers

	Male	% of Male	Female	% of Female	Total of Elderly	% of Elderly
DRESS						
Fashionable	153	43	72	36	225	41
Neutral	195	55	124	62	319	57
Dowdy	5	1	4	2	9	2
Total	353	99	200	100	553	100
POSTURE						
Normal	334	97	193	97	537	97
Bent-over, Decrepit	9	2.5	7	3.5	16	3
Total	353	99.5	200	100.5	553	100
GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS						
Bespectacled	88	25	44	22	132	24
Wrinkled	136	39	77	39	213	38
Gray hair	119	34	64	32	141	25
White/Gray Hair in Bun	0	0	42	21	42	8
White Hair	131	37	23	12	154	28
Balding (Receding)	179	51	0	0	179	32
Apron	2	0.5	14	7	16	3
Cane/Walking Stick	16	4.5	9	4.5	25	4
Pipe	4	1	0	0	4	1
Suspenders	19	5	0	0	19	3
Tie/Bowtie	79	22	0	0	79	14

The findings indicate that the stories presented the elderly as positive in appearance. Of all elderly characters presented 98 percent were either fashionable or neutral in appearance and 2 percent were dowdy. The vast majority, 97 percent, were presented with a normal upright posture.

The most frequently observed characteristic of the elderly was the white or gray hair shown on 61 percent of the elderly characters. Another frequently observed characteristic of the elderly was wrinkled skin--39 percent of both men and women. Approximately one half of the males were bald or balding. A few of the elderly, 4 percent, carried canes. Others were overweight, had big noses and double chins. The portrayal of the characteristics of the elderly in these stories was realistic, and none of the characterisitcs was applied frequently enough to cause stereotyping.

Literary genre, illustrations and overall impression of the aged. Both men, 33 percent, and women, 43 percent, appeared most often in modern/realistic fiction. Few older characters appeared in fantasy, 2 percent or in poetry, 5 percent. Many stories, 14 percent, showed elderly people providing information to the reader in some way: writing, teaching, inventing or explaining how to do something. Almost three-fourths of the illustrations showing older people were cartoonish as opposed to realistic in nature. However, the illustrations were not discriminatory toward the elderly because a large portion of the artists' portrayals were expressionistic whether the characters in the picture were young or old. The overall impression of the aged was positive--94 percent of the time the elderly were represented favorably.

DISCUSSION

The sexist ratio in this basal reader analysis is higher than that reported by Ansello (1978) when he examined the portrayal of age in 656 books. He found 41 percent female, 55 percent male, and about 3 percent indeterminate roles in his investigation; this study observed 36 percent female and 64 percent male assignments in the readers. Kingston and Drotter (1981) reported 46 percent female and 54 percent male older characters in his analysis of 188 total older characters. Fillmer's (1984) study of children's attitudes toward the elderly also disclosed a sexist bias favoring men.

A higher number of black and Hispanic representation was noted in this analysis than was presented by Ansello (1978). He found 3.4 percent black and 2.1 percent Hispanic characters, whereas this study revealed that 8 percent of the older characters were black and 4 percent were Hispanic, about double the previous findings.

Kingston and Drotter (1981) and Ansello (1978) reported that few aged were assigned principal roles in the readers they examined. This analysis detected 38 percent of the older people fulfilling roles as main characters (some stories had more than one main character); 24 percent had supportive roles, and 41 percent had minor roles in the stories.

Some studies reported that the elderly were represented as unfashionable and unattractive. Stereotyped images of women in rocking chairs, with aprons, and hair in a bun predominated. However, in this analysis 22 percent of the older people were represented as attractive. The percentage of the elderly wearing glasses was 24--almost one fourth of all men and women shown. Approximately one fifth of the elderly women had their in buns (some

of the younger women had their hair in buns too); a minority, 7 percent, of the women wore aprons. Stereotypes associated with older male characters were also in a lower proportion than previously reported. Only 4.5 percent of the men had a cane; fewer than 1 percent smoked a pipe; and only 5 percent wore suspenders. Men in ties were depicted 22 percent of the time.

Storey (1977), Kingston and Drotter (1981), and this present study noted that an artist may choose to portray a character as an older person even though the author does not describe the character as older. It seems that portrayals of the elderly are sometimes interpretations of the illustrators and not intents of the authors. In this examination it was observed that one series had a large number of older people in the illustrations, while another series showed illustrations favoring more youthful characters--a judgment frequently left to illustrators.

Overall, the data indicated that there has been improvement in the way older characters are presented in children's books. However, some of the differences in the findings may be attributed to various subjective interpretations of the investigators. For example, how does one identify an older person--a character who is over 60? over 65? over 70? What if the author does not indicate the age? What criteria constitute fashion? What characterizes an older person as being attractive versus unattractive? Although the researchers attempted to be objective in their analyzes, no standardization was available for making accurate comparisons among the findings.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

It was the purpose of this analysis to determine the manner in which older characters have been portrayed in basal reader series since 1975.

This study confirmed that a larger percentage of males than females appear in the stories. The elderly are generally presented positively with regard to their abilities and personalities. Very few were represented as being frail or mean or crabby. Improvement in the way older people were depicted was noted in that very few aprons, canes, pipes, and suspenders were shown. Wrinkles, gray hair, and glasses were the major general characteristics observed in the illustrations. Whether a character appeared as an older or a younger individual was often the judgment of the artist, rather than a choice made by the author.

Do educators have a responsibility to examine the ways they influence children's perceptions of the elderly? Seefeldt et al (1981) quote Khan and Weiss (1973): "Education can not afford the luxury of having its most important affective outcomes occur as accidents or unintended effects of the curriculum." (p. 86) Jantz et al (1977) wrote:

> If school systems do endorse the democratic principle inherent in our way of life that places value, worth, and dignity on each human being, then they must begin to direct the experiences children have in school toward the development of positive attitudes toward all people, including the elderly. (p. 523)

Kincheloe and Bull (1982) agree that children and the elderly have needs, knowledge, and emotions to share. Fillmer (1981) points out that the self-concepts of elderly persons suffer from their being viewed as inferior, and younger persons suffer because their stereotyping of the elderly becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as they grow older. Parnell (1980) explains that the elderly have been deprived of opportunities to contribute their knowledge and expertise, and children are deprived of opportunities to develop healthy attitudes toward their own aging.

Many writers offer curriculum suggestions for identifying goals, strategies, and activities appropriate for fostering positive attitudes toward the elderly (John, 1977; Jantz et al, 1977; Storey, 1977 and 1979; Parnell, 1980; Fillmer, 1981; and Seefeldt et al, 1981) Ulin (1982) exhorts educators to become aware of their own attitudes and preconceptions, which probably mirror those of the general population, as educators "cannot help but influence youth's approach to age and aging." (p. 14)

With such an increase of older people anticipated by the end of this century, it is important for schools to prepare our youth to accept and value elders for the knowledge, expertise, ideals, and emotions they offer in a mutual relationship of sharing. "Needless to say, it is difficult to be an individual in a stage of life that is negated and rejected by the culture. Life cannot be pleasant when one is not shown respect..." (Page et al, 1981, p. 46) Since the future is an inevitable destination projected from the past, it behooves those aware to remediate the errors of the present.

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